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AUTHOR Root, Paul
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ABSTRACT

Since 1983, Arkansas schools have undergone vast changes to improve the quality of education in the state. The Arkansas State Supreme Court had ruled that the state school aid distribution formula was unconstitutional and needed to be rewritten. A standards committee examined the curriculum offerings of 382 secondary schools in 365 districts and found that a large majority did not offer music, chemistry, physics, advanced math, computer science, foreign language, or practical arts, and almost half had fewer than 38 study units. In addition, the standards committee discovered that many classrooms were overcrowded, and teachers had to cope with large class sizes or an excessive number of preparations. The committee prepared a report and recommendations for raising the state's educational standards. The legislature passed a sales tax and more than 100 new educational laws. New programs of recognition for schools, teachers, and students were created. New programs were created for the improvement of teaching, of schools, and of parent involvement. Teachers, administrators, and students were to be tested for competency in basic skills. As of the 1987-88 school year, 329 school districts were either in compliance with the new standards or in the final stages of meeting them. The schools were able to effect change so quickly due to the creation of 15 educational service centers that assisted schools with improvement in teacher inservice, standards, implementation, audio visual services, community relations, and cooperative purchasing. More than 2,500 new teachers, counselors, librarians, and administrators were hired to help schools meet the new standards. (ALL)

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN ARKANSAS

Paul Root

Change has been defined as a variation, modification, innovation, transition, reform and/or a new deal. Change is usually considered to be good if the people to be effected were involved in the process and agreed with the proposed changes. Arkansas schools are in a state of change that has been referred to by all the above definitions of change and sometimes preceded by strong adjectives. Since 1983, Arkansas schools have undergone so much change that no area of public education has remained untouched. Almost all educators agree with the need for the changes that are being undertaken. Many would change faster; some would change slower while others would say we need to change some things about our schools, but not this many things. Many people, including some educators, believe a poor state like Arkansas simply cannot afford a first class education system. Others say Arkansas will remain a poor state until it has enjoyed a few years of an education system equal to the best system in other states. To what degree the correct decisions have been made that will ultimately enhance the lives of all Arkansans through an improved education system are still unclear. It is clear, however, that Arkansas has made a bold effort to deal with inequality of educational tools to compete in a fast changing world economy.

In the spring of 1983, the State of Arkansas was faced with rewriting its school aid distribution formula because the Arkansas

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Supreme Court ruled that its present formula for distributing aid was unconstitutional. Governor Bill Clinton, representatives of the Arkansas Department of Education, the Arkansas Association of School Administrators, the School Board Association, the Arkansas Education Association and the Rural Education Association met representing the public schools of Arkansas to determine how the new funding formula would be written. It was determined early that new taxes would need to be provided in order for all schools to have a chance to be improved.

Governor Clinton began stumping the state building support for new taxes for improved education.

A standards committee, created by the Arkansas State Legislature and headed by Hillary Clinton, was already at work. In evaluating the need for new standards, it was discovered that:

209	Arkansas school districts offered	no art
204	" " "	no music
91	" " "	no chemistry
148	" " "	no physics
135	" " "	no math
326	" " "	no computer science
180	" " "	no foreign language
191	" " "	no practical arts
173	" " "	less than 38 study units

(Based on 382 secondary schools in 365 districts)

In addition to the findings related to lack of course offerings, it was discovered that many classrooms were overcrowded

and teachers were seriously overloaded with too many students or too many class preparations.

The standards committee met by-weekly through the summer of 1983, usually for two days. Every curriculum group in the state was invited to present their ideas for an improved curriculum.

The goal of the standards committee was to raise the minimum standards required of all Arkansas schools. As the standards committee was formulating its report with 75 open hearings and constant television and newspaper coverage, the Department of Education and Governor Clinton's staff was studying education in every state and making recommendations of initiatives to be included in the reform package to be introduced to the Arkansas Legislature.

When the standards committee completed its report, Governor Clinton called a special session of the legislature and opened the session on statewide television explaining the program to the entire state. What followed was the longest special session in the history of the Arkansas Legislature. A sales tax and more than 100 new laws were passed regarding education in Arkansas. All areas of education were considered and extra money was provided for higher education, vocational education and adult education as well as general education. New programs of recognition for schools, teachers and students were created. New programs were created for the improvement of teaching and improvement of schools and parent involvement. Teachers and administrators were to be tested for competency in basic skills. Money was provided for a new program of academic scholarships. More

money was provided for consolidation of schools that did not believe they could reach the standards. Approximately 80 per cent of Arkansas public schools were required to raise their local millage, in addition to the state sales tax, in order to meet the standards. Many of the small schools doubled their millage.

The greatest expense for the small school was expanding the curriculum and student services. The greatest expense for the larger schools was reducing class size.

In one of the most amazing efforts ever witnessed in education, 329 Arkansas school districts met the minimum standards or are in the final stages of having reached them. Every school district in Arkansas now offers physics, chemistry, music, art, computer science, foreign language, advanced math, advanced science and practical arts. Each school offers at least 38 courses on a two-year rotation basis. All schools are within the limits pertaining to classroom size. No more than 20 students can be in a kindergarten class. At the first through third level, no more than 23-25 students can be in one class. At the fourth through sixth grade, no more than 25-28 students can be in one class. No secondary teacher teaches more than 150 students per day, except in music, physical education and typing. In the elementary schools of Arkansas, every student now has access to a guidance counselor and an elementary librarian. Every secondary school in Arkansas now has a guidance counselor.

In the summer of 1983, the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville (UAF) published entrance requirements that would require freshmen to have taken some advanced math, science and foreign

language by the 1985-86 school year in order to enter the University without penalty. At that time, the valedictorians of more than 100 Arkansas school districts would have been required to take some pre-college courses at UAF because they had no opportunity to take those courses in high school. Today every public school in Arkansas offers the courses needed to prepare students for a college or university setting.

Each summer approximately 450 students attend the Governor's School at Hendrix College. This advanced course of study enriches many high schools that these students re-enter in September for their senior year. Last summer (1987), 31 additional two to three week seminars were added for more than 1000 gifted and talented students across the state. This, combined with more advanced courses and raised expectations of students, parents, and school personnel, has created a stronger academic atmosphere in Arkansa schools.

The most serious and immediate problem facing Arkansas educators is the eighth grade minimum performance test. In this year (1987-88), all eighth grade students must complete all areas of the minimum performance test and score at a predetermined level approved by the State Board of Education. The subject areas included on this test are reading, language arts, math, science and social studies. Students failing to pass the minimum performance test cannot be promoted to the ninth grade. Committees of teachers from each stuject area determined cut-off scores in each area of the test by determining which items a student must know to be considered minimally competent in that specific area.

Each student who fails any area of the test must be evaluated in terms of specific weakness and an individualized program of supplemental instructions must be provided to assist those students toward the goal of passing the minimum performance test. If more than 15 per cent of eighth grade students fail the test, the school must implement a school improvement program.

The minimum performance test will be administered two more times during the summer. Students who fail to achieve mastery after three attempts to pass the test will repeat the eighth grade. In an attempt to avoid large numbers of school drop-outs at that point, the Governor and the legislature raised the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 17.

One of the major reasons school personnel have been able to accommodate so much change so quickly was the creation of 15 education service centers or cooperatives. These co-ops, or centers, have assisted schools in all areas of improvement including: teacher inservice, standards, implementation, audio visual services, improved community relations and cooperative purchasing. Many teachers are now working at more than one school if they are needed for only one or two periods by each school.

In order to add to the number of new courses demanded and to limit class size, Arkansas has hired more than 2500 new teachers, counselors, librarians and administrators since 1983.

Arkansas and other predominately rural states have sent many of its young people to the great cities in the North and West unprepared for the rigors of big city life. They have

worked hard and have contributed to the lifeblood of this nation; but living in cities that spend millions for recreational facilities, they spend their spare time in their crowded conditions dreaming of a ham sandwich, a fishing pole and a creek bank. They remain hesitant, faltering parts of our social problem instead of vibrant, confident parts of the solution.

It is true that many strong, happy problem solvers who live in great cities today came from strong and happy problem solving families who lived on a farm. Our job in Arkansas education is what it has always been: We must dramatically raise the percentage of our students who do well wherever their dreams lead them.